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Entering a Systemic Revolution

David S. Mason
Butler University, dmason@butler.edu

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The collapse of the United States as the global hegemon constitutes a "systemic revolution" that will transform both the U.S. and the rest of the globe. Such a revolution is different from "normal" political revolutions, which entail an overthrow of the government. A systemic revolution ushers in even broader and more enduring changes in economy, society and culture, and it also transcends national boundaries, affecting other countries and the global system itself. It is a global paradigm shift, and we are right smack in the middle of it.

The term "systemic revolution" is not one that you encounter much in the literature or discussion of revolutions. Those who do use it, like the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, refer to systematic socio-economic change, but primarily *within* a particular country, as does most literature on revolutions. John Foran, in his book *Taking Power: On the Origins of Third World Revolutions*, gets at the idea of "world-systemic openings" for revolution, but sees them mostly affecting Third World countries rather than the global system itself.

I am using "systemic revolution" somewhat differently than either of these two, with an even broader meaning. Systemic revolutions are transformations that carry ideological or cultural changes—changes in the way people think or behave—that transcend any particular country, and which therefore have consequences that are more influential and enduring than those of "normal" revolutions. Systemic revolutions probably accompany political ones, but do not necessarily. They bring about a paradigm shift in the global order.

The idea and language of "paradigm shift" actually comes from the history of science rather than social or political history. In his canonical 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn shows that the major breakthroughs in science constitute such a paradigm shift, when new evidence or experiments simply don't fit the established theory any more. A new theory is designed to accommodate the new data, and "an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one." The theory of evolution and natural selection, for example, emerged when Darwin's meticulous collection of data during his voyage on the Beagle did not fit into the existing—most Biblical—notions of the emergence of species. His theories—a revolutionary overthrow of the old—became the fundamental basis of the biological sciences. The theory of Evolution not only survived, but was reinforced, by the wealth of new evidence as the discovery of DNA and the development of genetics.

A similar paradigm shift occurs during systemic revolutions in the political and economic sphere. Perhaps the best way to explain this is to use some historical examples. I will focus on modern Europe, but there are plenty of examples from other times and places as well. Systemic revolutions in modern Europe include not only the Darwinian Revolution of the mid 19th Century, but also The French Revolution of 1789, the

Industrial Revolution of the late 18th century, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The French and Russian revolutions are, arguably, primarily "political" revolutions, in that they effected the overthrow of one ruling system and class with another. The Industrial Revolution and the Darwinian Revolution are different creatures altogether. They certainly affected politics in important ways, but their impact was much more diffuse, with the Industrial Revolution laying the ground for mass production, capitalism, urbanization, and social change; and Darwinism shaking the foundations of both science and religion, and even of the way we think about ourselves as human beings.

As different as these four "revolutions" were, though, they were all "systemic" in the ways I described above. They came about because the old models—monarchy, feudalism, mercantilism, creationism—didn't fit the new realities and new ideas. All of these revolutions reached into virtually every sphere of the human enterprise, affecting the political system, the economy, the social structure, culture, science, gender roles, family life, and the ways we think about humanity and eternity. Furthermore, these revolutions were all transnational. Napoleon and the Enlightenment Philosophes carried the ideas of the French Revolution all across Europe, and beyond. The Industrial Revolution may have started in England, but soon metastasized through Europe, the Americas and then on to the rest of the world. The same could be said of Darwin's theories, which had a global impact equal to those of Galileo, Copernicus, Newton and, later, Einstein. Darwinism's illegitimate offspring, Social Darwinism, also had global reach. As for the Russian Revolution—by the 1970s almost half the world's population was living under governments inspired or supported by the communists of Russia.

One other systemic revolution deserves special mention—the 1989 anti-communist revolutions of Eastern Europe. These are the most recent example of a systemic revolution, and they are also interesting because they were unique in several respects. First of all, they were, with only one exception, nonviolent—one of the rare examples of a political revolution executed without bloodshed. Another extraordinary feature of the 1989 events was the incredible speed with which they unfolded and spread. From the time of Solidarity's victory in the elections of June until the end of the year, communist regimes fell, one after another, in Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. Regimes considered entrenched and all-powerful collapsed like stacked cards faced only by large crowds demanding their departure. Within a few years, the same things happened in all of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union, bringing that country and its political system to a close.

These 1989 revolutions were thoroughly "systemic" both in their internal and external dimensions. They brought down a political system and an economic one, and replaced one ideology—state socialism—with another—democratic capitalism. In the years after 1989, all of these countries experienced wrenching changes in the political structure, forms of economic organization, social structure, and individual sense of identity and consciousness. These revolutions were quintessentially systemic in that they brought down the communist system across Europe, both in terms of the individual countries and the unifying ideology. The collapse of communism in Europe brought an end to the Cold War, which had dominated international politics for forty years. The peaceful "velvet" revolutions provided a model for subsequent "orange" and "rose" revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and for the sudden and swift end of apartheid government in South Africa. 1989 transformed Poland, Eastern Europe, and the globe.

So what does all this have to do with the current predicament of the United States? Most of us—even, at last, the experts!—are starting to see the handwriting on the wall now, as we see collapsing around us the stock market, housing markets, job markets, banks, manufacturing, retail stores and news media. These institutions don't function very well anymore, in the face of new realities and new ideas. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. The most startling element of the current developments is the systematic dimension of U.S. decline. It is both domestic and international. And within the country, it is evidence in almost every aspect of social life—the economy, society, infrastructure, culture, politics, etc. Furthermore, all these elements of decline are interrelated and driven by longer term problems that pressed against us before Obama, and even before the catastrophic administration of G.W. Bush. The 20th Century, often called "The American Century" had already come to a close before the awful attacks of September 11.

America's decline is a result of three convergent and interrelated phenomena: the deterioration of the U.S. itself—especially in the economic realm but in many other respects as well; the increasing influence of other global powers; and the changed nature of global interactions. The decade-long convergence of all three of these phenomena marks a global shift of historic proportions, and one that defines a much different place in the world for the United States and its citizens.

The central aspects of U.S. decline are economic. The federal government, the state governments, and most households have been living beyond their means for a generation, and the result is unprecedented levels of government, household, mortgage and consumer debt. Americans citizens spend and consume more than they earn, and the United States as a whole consumes more than it produces. This has posed a burden on the rest of the world that is unsustainable in the long run.

The U.S. has also fallen behind other countries in many other areas where we flourished during The American Century. The educational system, once considered the world's best, now ranks near the bottom among developed countries. Health care shows the worst results, on average, of any major developed country. The U.S. has higher poverty rates, more violence, and greater inequality than almost any other developed democracy. Our roads, highways, bridges and dams—most built near the beginning of the American Century—are decrepit and in need of major investments. Even the country's vaunted political system, tarnished by private interests, money and low levels of political participation, is no longer a model for emulation much of anywhere in the world.

While the U.S. has been on a long slide, both with our domestic health and our international reputation, other countries and regions have been moving ahead, and gaining confidence and clout. China is now the world's workshop, and has the fastest sustained economic growth of any country in history. The European Union has brought together 27 countries into a peaceful and healthy community—an economic bloc bigger than the U.S. and with many countries more successful than the U.S. in providing health care, education and welfare to their citizens. Many other countries are increasingly prosperous, confident and assertive, to the point of challenging U.S. dominance in their own parts of the globe.

In addition, globalization has changed the rules of the game. Labor and capital move more easily around the world, making it more difficult for the U.S.—or any

government—to control economic development. Organizations that span national borders—international and non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, terrorist groups--are for good or ill challenging the power and influence of countries. All of this make global politics more complex, and less subject to the influence of single nation-states, especially go-it-alone ones as the U.S. has been for the last eight years.

President Obama is making noble efforts to bolster America's global reputation and reverse its decline, but in my view, it is too little and too late. The rest of the world has already caught up or caught on, and is not much interested in the U.S. resuming its global leadership. Furthermore, what the world needs now, in confronting problems--of global warming, pollution, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, poverty and epidemic disease—is cooperation and compromise rather than "leadership."

The decline of the U.S. has potentially revolutionary implications both at home and around the world; though it is the global impact of American decline that leads me to group it with the "systemic revolutions" of recent history. But let me first briefly address the remote—though real—possibility of a political revolution here in the U.S. The intensity and speed of U.S. economic decline certainly creates some of the preconditions for revolution. Think about the U.S. situation in light of some of the most prevalent theories of the causes of revolution: the growing "immiseration" of the working class (Marx); "rising expectations"—after a period of growing affluence, people expect more, but the improvements slow down or reverse; increasing inequality and a growing gap between rich and poor; the weakening and breakdown of state organizations (Skocpol). All of these things are happening now, in varying degrees, and these processes seem unlikely to reverse anytime soon. Whether they are sufficient to lead to political revolution, however, is a separate issue from that of systemic revolution.

Whether or not there is an internal revolution in the U.S., the global changes caused by America's decline by themselves constitute a transformation on the scale of a systemic revolution. The U.S. has dominated the globe for at least a half century and, one could argue, even longer. The country had the biggest economy, the wealthiest citizenry, the strongest military, and the most admired political system; its language and its money were considered the global standards; its popular culture, fads, trademarks and consumer goods were coveted and mimicked around the globe. No country in history has so dominated the world as the U.S. did during the American Century.

With the disappearance of U.S. hegemony, all that has changed. The U.S. economy—of free-market capitalism—is no longer the standard or the model—especially now that its weaknesses are so manifest. American-style democracy, so corrupted by money and special interests, is no longer the "beacon on the hill." Many foreigners see American individualism and exceptionalism as a weakness rather than a strength, and even a kind of perversion. Americans' appetite for consumer goods, it is now becoming clear, has hurt the planet and its people by exhausting its resources and polluting its environment.

So the collapse of the U.S. as a global hegemon creates a big hole in the center of the economic and political universe. Some analysts, mostly Anglo-Americans, worry that the world will be less stable and less peaceful without the dominating presence of the U.S. The British historian Niall Ferguson frets about "apolarity"—a global vacuum of power leading to "a new Dark Age" that will be both chaotic and violent.[3] Such a view, however, is overly generous in its assessment of America's recent role in the world,

which has had as many negative as positive consequences. The global economic meltdown—originating on Wall Street—is just the most recent example.

While Ferguson's apocalyptic view may be too extreme, it does point to the extensive nature of global changes occasioned by the withering of the American superpower. These changes will be momentous and wrenching both for American citizens and for the rest of the world. A more "natural" U.S. GDP—one that matches more closely the size, wealth and productivity of the U.S. compared to the rest of the world—would be about half the size of the present one. An economic decline of this scale—50%--would be close to that of the Depression and will be extraordinarily traumatic for Americans, and probably result in a truly revolutionary transformation of the economy—if not an actual revolution.

The rest of the world will also have to adjust, in part because so much of global trade has depended on American consumption. Global changes will not simply be economic, though. With the decline of U.S. political power, a much different kind of global order will emerge; probably with many regional powers and transnational organizations and many cross-cutting alliances and agreements. Without a single superpower standing in the way, perhaps the world can finally begin working, together and cooperatively, on the big issues facing the people of the world, and the planet. This would indeed constitute a revolutionary change of systemic proportions.